



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Thiruvarpu satyagraha: A temple entry movement

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2026, 30(01), 007-010

Publication history: Received on 10 December 2025; revised on 15 January 2026; accepted on 19 January 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2026.30.1.0111>

Abstract

The political and social atmosphere in Kerala in the 1920s grew tense as people sought ways to overcome the social stigma of untouchability. All these agitations were targeted to achieve temple entry and open the approach roads to temples to the *avarnas*. These agitations gave new magnitudes of social change, resulting in low-caste mobilization. Thiruvarpu Satyagraha is one such struggle with the aim of unrestricted travel along the temple roads of Thiruvarpu. The Thiruvarpu temple became a focal point of the Satyagraha to eradicate humiliating social practices and customs.

Keywords: Temple Entry; Untouchability; Avarnas, Dewaswam; Temple Entry Proclamation

1 Introduction

From the mid-19th century onwards, Kerala society witnessed powerful movements to remove caste restrictions and untouchability. Inspired by the heroic endeavors against untouchability, several struggles occurred in diverse regions of Kerala, from Suchindram in the south to Payyannur in the north. [1] The Thiruvarpu temple is located in the Kottayam district of modern Kerala, within the Thiruvarpu Panchayath. [2] It is located in a comparatively low-lying area. Historical records indicate that the Raja of Thekkumkoor had six important temples in his domain, which later became part of the expanded Travancore during the conquests of Matrhandavarma. [3] In the vicinity of the temple, Brahmins and Nairs settled, and their lives were centered on temple affairs in those days. Beyond that area, the settlements of others, like those of Ezhavas, Pulayas, and Parayas. Geographical features of the area comprised limited road facilities, mostly to the surroundings of the temple only. It was mainly due to the proximity of Vembanatt *Kayal* for water transport and *Puncha* paddy fields.

The place name, Thiruvarpu related to the name of the temple itself. [4] It is said that Vilvamangalathu Swamiyar was journeying through a boat on one of his travels when the oar hit against a submerged object, causing blood to flow from it. [5] On retrieving it, it was found to be a Krishna idol of antiquity. [6] The sage carried it with him, realizing its sanctity, and when he placed the idol on the ground for his personal routine, suddenly he spied a '*Varpu*' [7] and stood the idol in it. Later, a temple was erected in that place itself under the directives of the Thekkumkoor ruler. Vilvamangalam himself consecrated the idol in the '*Varpu*' into the temple, and hence the place got the name Thiruvarpu. [8] Thiruvarpu temple is famous in the fact that temple opens at 2 am in the early morning in every day. The main deity of the temple is Sree Krishna, and the temple is now under the Thiruvithamkoor Devaswam Board. *Uzhappayasam*, dedicated to the deity Sree Krishna at 3 am in the early morning, is one major offering to God here. The annual festival of the temple commences before the day of Vishu, and it lasts for 10 days. The procession ceremony is on the 6th day, known as *Ancham Purappad*. Another attraction of the festival was the Elephant race. On the first day of the annual festival, the race was conducted. The temple holds the good elements of religious harmony. One instance of that is to purify the oil presented to the temple for poojas; it should be touched by a Christian believer. [9]

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Thiruvarpur Swamiyar mutt, located near the temple, was a replica of caste based feudal structure in Kerala in the 19th century. It was the custodian of the whole land and property. The extraction of temple wealth made the mutt more powerful. The *avarnas* or the depressed classes were denied their basic human rights. They had no access to the roads, and even the water routes in the vicinity of the temple were denied to them on certain occasions.

The first stimulation to fight against these caste evils was injected into the people of Thiruvarpur by Sree Narayana Guru, the greatest among the saint luminaries of modern Kerala. During his visit to the locality, Guru realized that even the caste sections below the elite group also practiced untouchability on their subsequent lower sections.[10] It became very strange for the given to see that a community, which wanted to abolish caste, even practiced untouchability. He wanted to stop the untouchability practiced by the Ezhavas towards the lower sections. Guru also demanded the abolition of evil spirit worship with blood sacrifices and fermented drinks by an innovative form of worship.[11] Actually, Guru gave a new horizon to the downtrodden sections, only permitted to sit on the lowest rung of social order. Guru's exhortation to gain strength through organization was actually internalised by Kerala society. It was under his auspices that *Sree Vijnanodayam*, an organization, was started at Thiruvarpur by Krishnan Kesavan from Abalakkattu, and the Ezhava family, where an earlier visit was made.[12] It was this organization that raised the first voice for the fight for the right way, or *Vazhinadakkal Samaram* in Thiruvarpur. By that time, people of Central Kerala began to listen and showed eagerness to learn more about the situation, which gained the attention of T.K. Madhavan and others.

Getting inspiration from the practical success achieved in Vaikom Satyagraha, the Thiruvarpur Satyagraha was organized by T.K. Madhavan, a champion of temple entry, who always raised the question of temple entry in the editorial in *Desabhimani*. [13] He arrived at Thiruvarpur on 1101, *Thulam 27*, and conducted a discussion with K. Narayana Panikkar, Swami Satyavrata, a disciple of Sreenarayana Guru, and Koprathu Sankaran Nambootiri. From the beginning to the end of the struggle, C. Kuttan Nair actively participated. C. Kuttan Nair and C. V Kunjukrishnan were its leaders.[14] The first measure as a part of the Satyagraha was the recruitment of volunteers, which was entrusted to Kannara Gopala Panikkar.[15] The initial steps were arranged in the form of a boat travel by T.K. Madhavan along with Swami Satyavratam, Narayana Panikkar, Koprathu Sankaran Nambootiri, and one Thevan from the Pulaya community.[16] They were accompanied by other members of the *Pulaya* community in a country boat; the police also escorted them, but did not prevent them. Thus, water route entry was successful, and it filled them with new confidence to approach the roads, which were beyond their catchment area.

In the following days, T.K. Madhavan made consultations with the *Devaswam* Commissioner and others. His suggestion was to build a new compound wall around the temple. But the idea was discarded by T.K. Madhavan.[17] The reason was that, at present, non-Hindus are allowed to travel through the temple roads while the new wall is being built; however, they were previously denied this right. The non-Hindus convened a meeting at Kottayam YMCA Hall under Mr. K.K. Thomas strongly protested against the new ordinance of the *Devaswam* Commissioner and his idea to build the temple wall, by which travel through the approach roads by the non-Hindus was also prohibited.[18] Without considering the protest, a new temple wall was built across the road, and billboards indicating the non-entry of the *avarnas* and non-Hindus were installed there. T.K. Madhavan got the letter from the *Devaswam* Commissioner containing the promise of constructing a new road if the old road was closed. The promise was accepted by the leaders of the struggle, but it will not become a reality. So, a meeting was convened in front of the temple gate. T.K. Madhavan and people from all communities participated in it.[19] K.R. Narayan, in his speech, made a declaration that, at any cost, temple entry would be gained. To face the agitation, the ruling authorities took severe measures, and they forbade public gatherings within a one-mile perimeter. Another one forbade the speech of T.K. Madhavan and C. Kuttan Nair within the Kottayam district. By this time, Mahatma Gandhi visited Kerala, though he did not come to Thiruvarpur, but the incidents there were mentioned in his speeches that he made in other places. Violent clashes broke out in this locality, while in October 1927, Gandhi visited Travancore. The Congress leaders like T. K. Madhavan and others met him at Alleppey and acquainted him with the situation in Thiruvarpur and other places.[20]

Satyagraha started at Thiruvarpur on October 6, 1927. On that day, three Ezhavas and one man dressed like a monk climbed the temple wall and violated the custom. The *savarna* demanded a *suddhi* ceremony. Usually, when a temple was polluted by a Christian or an *avarna*, it needed further purification. Twenty-one bottles of water with flowers were necessary for it. Idol should also be washed with four bottles of water, and a day feast to the *Namboothiri* is also necessary. Temple should be cleaned three times a day these days[21].

In the meantime, T.K. Madhavan came to Thiruvarpur, and on 7th October 1927, T.K. Madhavan and 50 volunteers came to the western gate of the temple, challenging the *Devaswam* officers. But on the part of the officers, they kept silence, and no provocation was made. The next day, the *Devaswam* Superintendent came to Madhavan's house and discussed the plans of the struggle. T.K. Madhavan boldly opined that at any cost, the right to the temple should be secured. In the following days, the work on the temple wall construction continued. In the meantime, C. Kuttan Nair went to Tamil Nadu

to meet Mahatma Gandhi, who was there at that time, to inform him of the progress of the events. C. Kuttan Nair presented a plan of action before Gandhi to lead a peaceful struggle, and Gandhi promised him to visit Thiruvarpur. But the promise cannot be realized, as it was passed to Cochin through Alleppey. Gandhi mentions the Thiruvarpur issue and opines that the ordinance to forbid meetings around the temple was unacceptable. Gandhi also demanded that the Government cancel the orders without delay and wrote a letter to W.H. Pitt, the Travancore Police Commissioner, to settle the Thiruvarpur issue.[22] These incidents brought statewide attention to the issue.

Later, the attempt of the leaders to take a photo of the newly constructed temple wall led to a clash with the police. Members of the Swamiyar mutt attacked T.K. Madhavan, C. Kuttan Nair, and others. Even then, they proceeded to the gate of the temple, and about 50 *savarnas* rushed towards them when they reached the Siva temple and brutally beat them. The *avarnas*, who stood far behind, rushed to the scene for a counterattack, but T.K. Madhavan prevented them from making further violence. Hearing the news, people from various places like Kumarakom, Kiliroor, Karappuzha, and Kottayam, regions flowed to Thiruvarpur, and a mass public gathering was organized in the evening as a protest against the *savarna* attack. The event slowly subsided and marked the end of Thiruvarpur Satyagraha.

One of the main features of the Thiruvarpur satyagraha was that it was a much more peaceful way, a Gandhian method of pressure and pact. T.K. Madhavan played a major role in putting the *avarnas* and *Tiyyas* of Thiruvarpur against the untouchability, though critics think that he organized these struggles to prevent the *Ezhavas* from joining other religions. He died on 27th April 1930.[23] He was a dynamic leader who shook the *avarnas* and *Tiyyas* to awaken from the dogmas of untouchability and brought them to the mainstream of social mobility. The Satyagrahis achieved their aim successfully with the Temple Entry Proclamation of Travancore King Sree Chithira Thirunal on November 12, 1936 A.D. In the next year, in 1937, Gandhi visited Thiruvarpur.[24] He came to Thiruvarpur along with a group of people, mostly *avarnas*, and made a speech there on 19th January 1937. He reminded that Thiruvarpur, the place of the Satyagraha, witnessed unbearable sufferings and hardships of the *avarna* sections of the society. He opined that when the *avarnas* got the verdict of freedom, it might be a repentance of the sin done by the *savarnas* to them. Its impact became more fruitful when the *savarnas* internalise the essence of the Temple Entry Proclamation; they are then free from their sins, and a cordial life is best conceivable between *avarnas* and *savarnas*.

2 Conclusion

The Thiruvarpur Satyagraha is a memorable event and a struggle against untouchability in Kerala. A struggle to win access to public roads and the right to temple entry resulted in the formation of public spaces, which resulted from the sufferings and hardships of a generation that cannot be forgotten. It was a bold attempt to wash away the age-long curse of untouchability.

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